

Definitions

- *Alphabet*—p 18, also see figure 2-1, p18
- *Byblos*—Phoenician city-state, believed to be the place our alphabet (originally North Semitic writing of the Canaanites, Hebrews, Phoenicians) originated. The Greeks named papyrus “byblos”—it was exported through the city-state of Byblos—and the word “Bible” is derived from “Byblos” (in Greek, “the [papyrus] book”).
- *Aramaic Alphabet*—early derivation of N. Semitic script—predecessor of Hebrew and Arabic (and others)
- pp22, 23, Cadmus, “the power of Cadmus.”
- *boustrophedon*—writing in which the characters alternate left-to-right, then right-to-left, on each succeeding line.
- *uncial*—a rounded letterform (more in Ch4)
- *capitalis monumentalis*—monumental capitals. Roman architectural inscriptions, composed of geometric forms adapted from the square, triangle and circle. These were chiseled in to the stone, but originally drawn onto the stone with a brush.
- *codex*—see p29
- *capitalis quadrata*—square
- *capitalis rustica*—“rustic”
- *parchment*—pp28, 29; made from the skins of animals
- *vellum*—pp28, 29; refined parchment, from the skin of newborn calves
- *glyph*—picture

Information to Know

The development of writing had its earliest origins in simple pictures (cave paintings, approx. 35,000 B.C.). These paintings were not considered “art,” rather were the beginnings of what we now call “visual communication.” They are called *pictographs*—elementary pictures or sketches to represent the things depicted (see left: ox, house). Pictographs evolved into ideographs—symbols to represent ideas or concepts (i.e. skull and crossbones represents “death” or “danger.”)

The earliest written records are from the Sumerian people of Mesopotamia, around 3,100 B.C. They depict pictograph tablets, with information structured into horizontal and vertical divisions.

Approx. 2,800 B.C. evidence shows that pictographs were “written” in horizontal rows from left-to-right and top-to-bottom. Presumably easier to write in this manner, the pictographs appeared less literal.

Approx. 2,500 B.C., wedge-shaped characters were evident and pictographs evolved into cuneiform (Latin for “wedge-shaped”). Cuneiform was difficult to master, with 560 signs; only an elite few had opportunity to master it.

Writing evolved and the system of depicting things with pictographs or ideas with ideographs led to a system whereby the sounds of the objects were depicted. Cuneiform developed into rebus writing where pictographs were used to represent words/syllables with the sound of the object depicted. Soon abstract signs were used to represent syllables which were made by combining simpler sounds.

When the Persians overtook Mesopotamia (538 B.C.), the civilization began to perish. Further takeovers by the Greeks and Romans left the Mesopotamian culture in ruins by the time of the birth of Christ.

The *Phoenicians* took the complexity of cuneiform and reduced it to simple phonetic signs—an alphabet.

An alphabet is a series of simple visual symbols that stand for elementary sounds. These symbols can be connected and combined to make a visual configuration for any sound, syllable or word.

The earliest known alphabet is from the Phoenicians. Before 1,000 B.C. the Phoenicians apparently were aware of the Mesopotamian cuneiform writing, and also of other forms of visual communication such as Egyptian Hieroglyphic and pictographs from the island of Crete (the Cretan pictographs are important to note—it is believed that the Cretans were using a pictograph system by 2,800 B.C., and by 1,700 B.C. their pictographs appeared more like linear script writing believed to be a precursor to the spoken Greek Language). Also refer to pp 18, 19, note the Phaistos Disk and the possibility that moveable type was used in Western culture as early as 2,000 B.C.).

The Phoenician system, in use by 1,500 B.C., had 22 characters. Writing was produced in a right-to-left style. Phoenician alphabet characters represent the historical beginning of the Roman alphabet we use today (see left). “Versions” appear to have evolved into the Hebrew and Arabic alphabets believed to have been used during the same historical period. Today Arabic contains the 22 original, plus six additional, characters. Hebrew and Arabic are still written from right-to-left.

>> Refer to pp 24, 25, democratic versus theocratic writing.

Approx. 1,000 B.C. the Greeks adopted the Phoenician alphabet. The Greeks took the consonant-only Phoenician alphabet and changed five consonants to vowels which have evolved into our present a,e,i,o,u.

The Greeks converted the awkward appearance of the Phoenician alphabet. Greek writing had a visual order and balance—letters were written on a baseline in an even repetition of form and space and they appeared standardized—a system of horizontal, vertical, curved and diagonal strokes is evident.

>> Refer to pp131–133, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (class reading)

Greek writing evolved from the Phoenician right-to-left to a right-to-left, left-to-right pattern and then to a left-to-right movement which continues today.

By approx. 700 B.C., the Iliad and the Odyssey had been written, a Greek culture was developing. The Parthenon was built 447–432 and Euclidian geometry was developed 300B.C. The Greek alphabet appears to have been “standardized” in Athens approx. 400 B.C., with (and still contains) 24 characters.

>> Refer to bottom pp 24, 25 (Greek signature seals).

It is estimated that Rome conquered Greece approx. 100 B.C., yet it appears that the Romans became aware of the Greek alphabet during the early first millennium B.C., that the Romans adopted, and began to adapt, the Greek alphabet. Approx. 250 B.C. the Latin alphabet contained 21 letters. During the First Century B.C. the Romans added two letters (Y and Z from the Greek, as the Romans were “borrowing” Greek words containing these sounds after the Roman conquest of Greece). Three additional letters were added during the middle ages, with the Roman alphabet then containing 26 letters (those of the contemporary English alphabet).

The Romans are noted for their monumental letterforms used as architectural inscriptions (*capitalis monumentalis*). Roman inscriptions were carefully crafted of geometric forms adapted from the square, triangle and circle.

>> Refer to pp27, 28—*capitalis quadrata* and *capitalis rustica* (condensed letterforms)

After the fall of the Roman Empire a splintering of east and west occurred. The eastern part of the empire thrived as the Byzantine empire, the western part degenerated. Illiteracy, poverty, superstition became commonplace and a feudal society of noble elite and common peasants evolved. The Medieval era lasted from approx. 500 A.D. until the 15th Century Renaissance and the learning that was prevalent in classical Greece and Rome were almost lost.